

The year ahead – 2025-26 – will be my penultimate year as Children’s Commissioner for England. It will also mark 20 years since the establishment of this office – a milestone that offers an opportunity to reflect on the progress we have made and a reminder about the many urgent challenges that remain. More than 25 years since the death of Victoria Climbié, and in the shadow of the death of Sara Sharif, the work of this office has never been more important. The past tells us what happens when we fail to protect children. The future must be different. I will spend my remaining time as Commissioner making sure it is.

During my time so far as Children’s Commissioner I have seen clearly that children are often an afterthought for policy makers. They are too often overlooked. That is particularly true as the country responds to new pressures or to severe crises: whether that is how children were treated during the pandemic, or as small boat crossings increased, or in response to the 2024 summer riots. It is also happening as policy makers debate the introduction of assisted dying. Children’s views are too often not only unheard: they are not even considered.

With a new government in place, now is the moment to reshape how society considers childhood and children in England. Over the next two years, I will double down on ensuring my work has the greatest impact possible. That means listening to children’s voices, responding to them to change policy and practice directly, and ultimately making sure that everyone working with children is striving to make England the best place to grow up. My job is to help make that happen, by bringing what a million children have told me about their experiences and aspirations to decision makers.

As part of this work, I will be launching my most ambitious data project yet – Mapping Childhood – using four years of research to pinpoint the best places to grow up in England. Where a child lives should never define their future. This data will drive targeted action where it is needed most. We must be as ambitious for children as they are for themselves, because they deserve to have childhoods that are full of joy, hope and happiness – regardless of their circumstances or where they come from.

Childhood is short, and children should never be passed between services or left waiting for the help they need. Over the course of their childhood, most children will rely on some form of specialist support – whether that is from social care, for special educational needs, or for health reasons. Those needs often overlap and interact. However, the way we support children is disjointed.

I will shine a light on the importance of putting children at the centre of the way we think about the challenges they face. That means thinking broadly about their needs not designing systems from the top down. Health, education, social care, and justice must work together, ensuring no child falls through the cracks. In particular, I will support the implementation of the consistent identifier – which has the capacity to be a transformational building block for services for children: almost uniformly, failures of children’s services involve the failure to share information.

A key part of that story will be the role of schools. In September last year, I launched the biggest-ever survey of schools and colleges, gathering first-hand insights from close to 90% of all schools in England. The survey reveals a stark reality: schools are stepping in to provide essential frontline support for children where other services fall short. Alongside my Business Plan, I am publishing what schools have told me are their priorities and most pressing concerns, which will serve as the foundation for our extensive work on the role of schools in the wider community this year.

The Big Ambition survey told us that only one in five children feel listened to by politicians. I have spent the past year – and am now committing to spending the rest of my time as Commissioner – to changing how children are heard by the adults who make decisions about their lives.

I will listen to children’s voices and they will continue to guide everything myself and my office do – through my network of Youth Ambassadors and my SEND panel, through our first conference for young people: the Festival of Childhood, and our newly established Young Voices Forum. As always, I will also continue to engage with young people through surveys and further engagement to embed their voices entirely into all of my work, and any call to action that I make.

Children should not be seen as passive members of society – they should be considered in every piece of legislation which will have an impact on their lives. Children’s voices are at the heart of all our reports, and next year I am committing to producing child-friendly versions of our work for young people to be able to engage with. I am calling for all government departments and public bodies to do the same.

My Business Plan sets out our agenda for the year ahead and for my remaining time as Commissioner more broadly – but as always, my office and I will work in a responsive and dynamic way, to stay on top of what matters most to children.

There are still far too many children whose voices go unheard. Children who face shadows on their path that many of us could never imagine, let alone endure. Children like Sara Sharif. Our work has never been important or more urgent: when we say never in 2025, we must mean it.



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Children's version

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